

This month's Heber Valley Chamber of Commerce "Business of The Month" award was presented to *The Wasatch Wave*. The award was presented to Sue and Dick Buys (center) by Stephanie Webb (left) and LaVern Kocinski (right). The award is presented to local businesses for their contributions to the community.

1989

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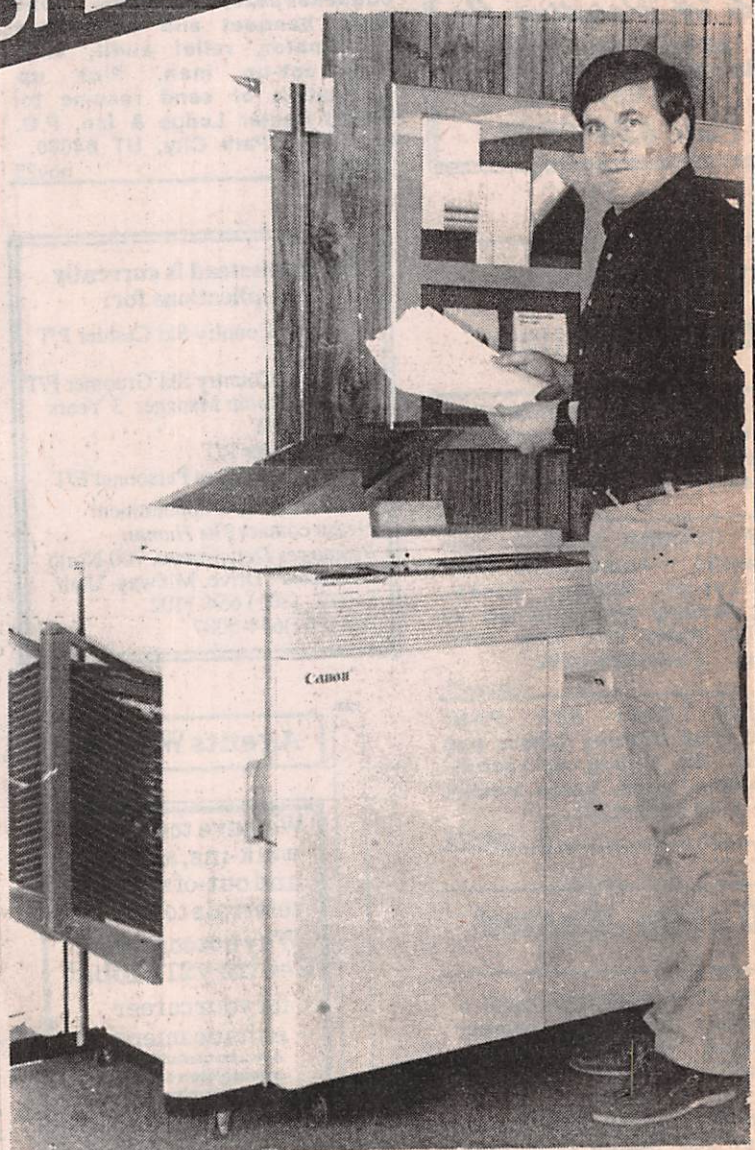
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The Editorial P

Editorial

A Negative Press, or Negative Human Nature?

The Press gets blamed for seeking out the dark and evil and then magnifying it to sell papers or draw viewers and listeners, including not only the notorious yellow sheets, like *The Inquirer*, but also legitimate news organizations.

Every time those kinds of accusations are tossed around, we do a little self examination to see if we might be guilty of focusing more on negative than positive news, in spite of our conscious efforts not to. Of course we are very quick to jump to our own defense, even when we are playing the part of our own devil's advocate, and we probably are guilty of a little rationalization here and there. But during some of our recent self examinations, brought on by the national political news/scandals, we've had to agree with some of our big brother and sister journalists who argue that they only report the news and it's the public that shines the spotlight on the negative.

We conducted a little unscientific research of what is printed on the first three pages of *The Wave*, because that's where most of the negative stories are. We set up three categories: one for "neutral" news in which no one is significantly hurt, mentally, physically or financially, but may be good or bad, depending which side of an issue one might be on; one for good news, which we figured would make most people happy and not many people angry; and the third for unquestionably bad news. We put one mark for each headline, picture and editorial in the appropriate column, from three, randomly selected editions of *The Wave* published during the past six months.

Six marks went into the bad news column, 12 fit into the neutral category, and 15 were good news to us and, in our opinion, probably were good news to most of our readers. That's not solid evidence that reports on bad news take up far less space in this newspaper than any other stories, but it does verify that we don't focus on the negative.

With that somewhat settled, we started keeping an informal, unwritten tab on what people comment on when we run into them on the street. We lost track of numbers after we talked to about six people. But, without question, very few say anything about good news we report. Most feedback is about what we would call bad news, or about the negative side of what we would call neutral news. Not many people say much to us, or ask questions about the stories we would put in the good news column.

Into that pot of food for thought, we tossed another phenomenon that we first learned in Journalism 101: When people aren't upset by something that's going on, they usually are silent. For the most part, they only call, write letters to the editor, or go to public meetings, when

they're discontent.

Think about this. People aren't lined up in Provo Canyon, or standing on corners along Main St. talking among themselves about how safely everybody is driving. Nobody ever notes in conversation that everybody is boating and swimming very safely at Deer Creek. How often do we see a couple dozen people spend an hour watching a house because it's not on fire?

The fact is that the ordinary just isn't news. The old cliché, "When a dog bites a man it isn't news, but when a man bites a dog, that is news," says it pretty well. Most people drive safely, don't have house fires, and don't have many unusual accidents. That is, of course, good news, but it isn't new news that makes headlines. People don't buy newspapers to read that nothing unusual has happened. They buy them to read about the unusual things that happen, and, let's face it, we are more curious about the bad things than the good. We'll probably read the story about a fatal accident before we read about who was selected as the rodeo queen.

We suspect that the reason people think journalists only report bad things is that they don't really notice the good things. Our unscientific observations indicate that people focus on and remember the negative news, even if it is completely surrounded by positive news. We'd bet that if we had someone read six successive issues of this newspaper, which included 47 unquestionably good news story and 19 that we'd all agree were bad news, then asked that person to list all the stories he remembered, he'd start out with the bad news, and probably remember a lot more of them than the good ones.

That's just the way we are. Maybe we feel guilty about our morbid minds and feel better when we blame *The Press* for filling them full of negative thoughts. That's okay, because we're used to being the messengers that get slain for carrying bad news.

But, for the record, *The Wave* does conscientiously seek out good news stories, and interesting stories without negative sides to them. We do compliment public officials when they do good things, just as we may criticize them when we disagree with them. Yes, we report crimes, injustices, and tragedies, and when big government agencies pick on our county. But we also report on people who plant flowers, win contests, and accomplish goals, and many of those stories make the front page, with pictures.

It should be noted that the reason *The Wave* has more good news to report than bad is because more good things happen in this county than bad, even if we tend to notice and remember the bad more than the good. That's a nice note to end on.